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# **video, memory and identity: my body, my history**

**by Jo Higgs  
(HGGJOA003)**

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**Compulsory declaration**

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## ABSTRACT

This explication is an inquiry into familial images of the past and the relationship of these images to history, memory and the present. Because some of these relationships are problematic, alternative ways of looking at memory and familial images through the medium of video are discussed. Particular attention is paid to the idea of a more visceral filmic language that attempts to access memory through the senses. I also discuss the development of both my theoretical and practical concerns through the planning, production, post-production and completion of my final video, 'The Nanny, the Granny, the Momma and Me' (2004).

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## INTRODUCTION

Most of my work this year has centred around two experiences. Firstly, I explored the origins of my creative identity by trying to remember the past. Secondly, I found a box of super 8mm reels of family film in my grandmother's garage. 'Granny's Reels' (Jones, 1948 – 1978) seemed initially to grant me what I desired: access into the past. But with this new presence came an underlying absence. Watching the silent images of a time before I was born became an ambivalent experience: a double-bind of access and denial; presence and absence (and loss). Using this experience as a departure point for my argument, this explication is an inquiry into familial images of the past and the relationship of these images to history, memory and the present. Because some of these relationships are problematic, this explication will try to present alternative ways of looking at memory and familial images from the past and, more importantly, at ways to recombine the fragments of the past as a means of making sense of the present.

The explication will also discuss the development of both my theoretical and practical concerns through the planning, production, post-production and completion of my final video, 'The Nanny, the Granny, the Momma and Me' (2004). Being the written component of the work, this explication provides a space in which to consider the extent to which my personal and theoretical ideas were realised in the final images and sounds that make up the practical component. Lastly, the explication concludes my thoughts about the nature of video and the senses, and it comments on the potential role of video as a means of representing the private stories and histories that make up the fabric of our collective South African identities.

## **PART 1: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION**

### **1.1 The beginning of the journey**

It was the experience of finding the reels that started the searching. There was a 'thinness' about the old films, an inability to contain the weight and substance of the history that they superficially represented. This 'thinness' made me contemplate my familial and, more specifically, my maternal history for the first time.

Ben Okri describes the formation and understanding of identity and belonging as a process inscribed in the act of storytelling (1998). I realised that what was missing from the silent reels were my stories: the articulation of my identity from the body of someone who knows. The gaps in my own memory felt like interstices in the fabric of history. The silence of the old reels was compounded by the fact that my grandmother has suffered from senile dementia and memory loss since before I was born and is therefore an absent storyteller. My video began as a journey to find those stories. It is essentially a search for identity and a means to represent that identity.

Before I begin with the necessary theoretical framework in which my artistic endeavours are located, I would like to explain my choice of style and tone for this explication. For me, the best theory is written as an attempt to come to terms with personal and emotional responses. For this reason, Part 1 is very much influenced by Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1981), which is a theoretical work that was partly inspired by Barthes's emotional response to his mother's death. I am interested in theory that is written with passion. I want to write about what I believe in, what I feel and what drives me as a creative being to put ideas into film. Reading the writings of

Dziga Vertov (Michelson, 1984), I am inspired by the lack of distance between his passion, his writing and his films. I wish to break the pattern of writing theoretical arguments that are dislocated from feeling and practice. That stated, I will now move onto my inquiry into the 'double-bind' of familial images of the past.

## 1.2 The double-bind

Many theorists such as Laura Marks (2000) and Roland Barthes (1981) have written about the ambivalent experience of viewing familial history in images. Marks follows Deleuze in drawing on Bergsonian theory to describe home videos as 'an image of time always splitting into two parts' (Marks, 2000: 40). In Bergsonian terms these two parts are comprised of the 'virtual image' and the 'actual image'. The virtual image is the image that is recorded, frozen in time and 'institutionalised' as the official representation of that moment (40). The 'actual image' corresponds to the actual experience of the moment, viscerally and psychologically, that passes smoothly into the next moment. In this description two major consequences of the family movie are implied. Firstly, the virtual image implies an inherent sense of loss in its attempt to 'capture' the moment because it fails to fully contain the experience (both viscerally and psychologically) and leaves only a thin picture as a reference for later identification. The image gives us plenty of information but it cannot hold the senses, the feelings and the layered sense of memory. It is a double-bind of access and rejection, presence and absence. This points to a larger aspect of film itself, that it is a 'shaping of absence' (Marx, 2003: lecture).

Barthes provides a more personal response to this double-bind when he describes his process of searching for his mother. He writes, 'I never recognised her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her *being*, and therefore I missed



her altogether.’ (Barthes, 1980: 65-66). His ambivalent response to the experience of looking for the ‘essence’ of his mother in her photographs is an important departure point for my thinking about familial images, memory and the present.

Larry Sultan, in an interview with his father, commented that:

... there are no clear lines – I don’t know where you stop and I start. And it’s crossed my mind that perhaps I’m out to justify my own life, my choices, by questioning yours. Perhaps I’m avenging an old wound... .  
(1999: 10).

In this light, it seems that Barthes’s quest to ‘find’ his mother (albeit a beautiful and poetic one) was less about the ‘truth’ in the pictures and her ‘essence’ than it was about himself and his struggle with identity after his mother’s death. This small critique of Barthes becomes important when one considers the access he attempts to gain and his faith in the ‘truth’ of the image. I would like to examine the old images as fragments facilitating memory, not directing it, and from there determine ways to reorganise the fragments in order to make sense of the present.

### **1.3 Too much faith in the image?**

Marks conceives of family film as ‘radioactive’ (2000: 47). The sense that the film was a real object, touched and watched at the time that the images were ‘captured’, lends to it a radioactive quality that ‘emanates’ from the past, somehow bridging the gap between the time filmed and the present (47). This ‘auratic’ charm intensifies the illusion of access and stands as the seductive side of the double-bind:

[The aura] is a brush with involuntary memory, memory that can only be arrived at through a shock. We return to the auratic object, still thirsty, because it can never completely satisfy our desire to recover that memory...

(Marks, 2000: 81).

Barthes describes the photograph's referential power to superimpose the past on the present. He also discusses the possibility of finding a person's 'essence' in the 'magic' or 'alchemy' of photography (1980: 66). The apparent access to the 'truth' of the past granted by the 'magic' images is irresistible. It is these reactions to the images of the past that make our relationship with them interesting and complex. To understand our relationship to notions of 'truth' and 'access' through documentary 'evidence' (incited by its 'auratic' and 'radioactive' quality), we must briefly examine the history of the documentary. It is my thesis that the hyperbolic faith in the image to deliver 'truth' that is evident in earlier thinking about film, still exists in the present and affects the way we interact with our personal histories in images.

To some extent, it has been the rigid division between 'fiction' film and 'documentary' that has contributed to the exaggerated faith in the image. Early theorists describe 'cinema as art' as, 'a sequence of discoveries aiming to drive out automatism from every element which can be subjected to artistic scrutiny' (Lotman, 1999: 62). In effect, this classification of 'cinema as art' versus a cinema of 'automatism' separates documentary from the subjectivity of 'art'. It is important to look at how these categories developed and how they still exist even though contemporary theory acknowledges the blurring of the boundaries.

Perhaps the deep underlying faith in the image is in fact a faith in photography as 'pure document'. Because photography seems removed from the subjectivity of human perception it appears more adept at telling and recording the 'truth'. Jurij

Lotman writes how journalists became less trusted in the latter half of the nineteenth century and were replaced as documenters by the camera:

[Journalism's] place was taken by photography, which possessed all the credentials of being unconditionally documentary and true, and was perceived as something opposite to culture, ideology, poetry, tendentiousness of any kind – as life itself in its reality and genuineness...

(Lotman, 1999: 57).

The point of examining Lotman's claims about the history of the documentary form is not to imply that people still believe in the 'reality' of the image to the same extent, but to highlight the history of perceptions of the image and to question how much of that thinking still lingers in our reading of images – particularly 'documentary' images. Lotman adds later that 'the ability to register motion added to the trust in the documentary reliability of films' (57).

Applying this thinking to the viewing of old family films sheds some light on the residual belief in the integrity and 'authenticity' of the image or of 'the cinema as objectivity in time' (Bazin, 1999: 198). Super 8 film is coded within film language as the visual vehicle of history and memory. Oliver Stone's use of the stock to create the illusion of archive and hence public memory in *JFK* (1991) is one example of Hollywood's established technique that encourages belief in the 'authenticity' of the super 8 image. Only the newsreel and the amateur, accidental 'automatism' of the family film or video offers a sense of authenticity and believability to the images. This can ultimately shape our relationship to the past by substituting our actual experience of memory. The issue of representing the past on film must be examined in order to understand how the worlds of film and media shape our reading of our personal images of the past.

Andre Bazin's categorisation that divides film into 'two broad and opposing trends: those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality... .' (1999: 43) is indicative of the type of binary opposition that divides film as 'art' from film as 'document'. He writes that it was 'montage that gave birth to film as an art' (44). In other words, it is the editing (be it 'invisible' or not) of a film that makes it into a subjective expression. If film is art because of montage then the family reel or video must belong to the category of those who put 'their faith in reality'. The family reel appears untampered with, uncut, just four to fifteen minutes of 'reality', unconstructed and 'actual'.

Early categorisations of film implied an indisputable kind of evidence that transgresses the subjectivity of the human eye owing to the unmediated workings of the camera. Film theory itself may now consider Bazin's hyperbolic visions out of date, but the indexical relationship of film to 'truth' still lingers – particularly with regard to the 'newsreel' or 'actuality' footage from the past. The double-bind inherent in the 'actual' familial images necessarily introduces some ambiguity into these observations.

#### **1.4 Ways around the double-bind**

Okri's observations on the fragmented nature of human communication owing to a 'world that has lost its centre, in which a multitude of contending versions of reality clamour in the mind' (29) echo earlier postmodern theorists. Frederic Jameson wrote of the same fragmentation as the 'schizophrenia' of language, by which he means a breakdown between the signifier and the signified, partly owing to the 'overproduction' of images (1998: 3). Bazin wrote that 'every image is seen to be an

object and every object as an image' (1999: 199), from which one could read that a confusion between what belongs to the physical world and what belongs to the representation of it, has started to fragment an understanding of our relationship to the physical, visceral body and to physical space. Perhaps postmodernism has distorted our understanding of memory and the past by 'seeking to create a uniform commodity value for all experiences' (Marks, 41).

These ideas about the nature of contemporary human communication are important because they indicate that the way we make images and tell stories has to come to terms with this fragmentation (both in the images and in ourselves). Instead of looking to the family reels (or any image of the past) as something that will grant me the access I want so badly and the 'reality' I want to experience I must see in them the potential to 'reactivate the past from the fragments of available image' (Marks, 32). From this point it will hopefully be possible to find a way to tell a story by looking for and recombining those fragments of 'reality'. In this regard, Marks's idea of building images of the past by bringing something new 'out of the ruins of the image' seems worthy of consideration (42).

Perhaps as a reaction to postmodernism, feminist film theory has moved into the arena of the body. Understanding memory and film in terms of the body opens up a variety of representational possibilities that explore identity and memory in new ways. The concept of 'haptic cinema' suggests a more visceral approach to filmmaking that appeals to the memory that is stored in the body. Beyond the theory of 'haptic cinema', I would also like to look at images of the past as subjective fragments and consider new ways of recombining these fragments as a link to my practical work.

### 1.5 Memory as visceral, embodied and embedded

Nadia Seremetakis provides some useful insights about the nature of memory as layered and embedded in physical spaces and the body. She writes:

If memory is sensory and embedded in matter, it comes in pieces, not as a totality. The excavation and assemblage of these fragments is an archaeological process; it does not show all at once, it is a peeling away of layers, the identification and exploration of a multiple stratigraphy.  
(2000: 310).

Her description of the Kalamata earthquake of 1986 as ‘an attack on memory and identity’, owing to the destruction of the physical spaces and objects within which private memory was held (312), is helpful in understanding the connections between memory, identity, the body and the physical world. Seremetakis points out that we relate to the world through our senses, building up relationships with objects and bodies. She describes how the earthquake severed the familiar connections between the bodies of the residents of Kalamata and the spaces around those bodies. This separation, she argues, dislocates memory from the body and therefore leaves an absence in identity (312). She goes on to describe the process of rediscovering memory-objects and rebuilding identity through piecing together the broken fragments to come to a new understanding of present identity. This process of ‘excavation’ relates to my own absences and provides ideas that guide my search for fragments (in pictures, interviews, spaces and landscapes) in order to reassemble a sense of self and history.

I am interested in the idea that an absence in identity is effected by a dislocation of the body from memory, and this issue causes me to ask two questions.

Firstly, can video be used to build a new relationship between my body and my history? Secondly, is it possible to articulate a new language in images that communicates my private history through video?

Marks is also concerned with the dislocation of the senses from the memory-environment and the resultant 'attack on memory and identity' (191). She writes of 'intercultural cinema' as a new filmic language that is emerging in the interstices of existing cultures, and she suggests the concept of 'haptic visuality' as a means of exploring the relationships between the senses, objects and memory through the use of video and film (191).

'Haptic visuality' is probably best explained as the opposite of 'optic visuality' (Marks, 191). Marks uses the term to describe images that bypass the process of identification and appeal directly to the senses. She explains how these images are 'closer' and 'warmer', stimulating the body of the viewer. She describes 'optic visuality' as images that are perceived in a 'calculated' way, are 'objective' and more 'distant' (170). Instead of simply creating the illusion of a seamless 'reality' with which to identify, Marks suggests that 'haptic cinema' invokes deeper levels of memory and experience through the body of the viewer. She explains how 'haptic visuality requires the viewer to work to constitute the image, to bring it forth from latency' (183). What appeals to me about the potential of 'haptic cinema' is the degree of ambiguity it returns to the image. Trying to relocate and reassemble memory through the visceral treatment of body, landscape and object in video is a necessarily ambiguous and unpredictable endeavour.

By combining Seremetakis's ideas on the 'excavation' of personal memory with some of Marks's ideas on the treatment of memory and the senses in video, I hope to set out, in the next part of this explication, some of the ways in which I have

tried to deal with memory, identity and the senses in my video. It is not my intention in the video to 'resuscitate the [past] and make it whole' (Marks, 191), because, I suspect, the images I am creating, like the super 8 images I discovered in my grandmother's garage, will never be able to hold the totality of human experience or memory. What I am attempting to do is to create, in an experimental way, an assemblage of fragments of memory. This will hopefully provide me with some interesting insights into my personal history and, on a more general level, into the relationship between memory, identity and video.

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## **PART 2: THEORY APPLIED –**

### **‘THE NANNY, THE GRANNY, THE MOMMA AND ME’**

I started the production of my final video with a few practical techniques in mind. I was looking for ways to explore the relationship between memory, identity and the body in the telling of the story that was emerging as the journey progressed. I will now review the techniques and influences with which I started the journey, and in so doing I will discuss how the ideas evolved and whether they were ultimately successful.

Central to my experience of the journey is the fact that it was my body in the landscape of my past: listening and smelling, seeing, tasting and touching. Unlike the people in the Kalamata earthquake which Seremetakis discusses, I was reconnecting the body to the memories while I was visiting places and people. To some extent, while I was operating the camera and monitoring the sound, the earthquake happened in reverse and the dislocation between my memory and my body was less present. The relationships between my senses and the objects and bodies of my past were, to some extent, re-acquainted. The meeting with my granny, although obviously a moment of absence as a consequence of her impaired memory, was also full of sounds and smells and textures that re-acquainted my body with my history and my memory. The real question for me then is whether I was able to communicate or pass on the sense of that re-acquaintance with memory and history to the viewer. At the same time, that ‘re-acquaintance’ did not fully assuage the absence and loss of the old films and I needed to communicate that too.

A visual texture belonging exclusively to low-resolution video cameras is the pixellation that results from the overextension of the digital zoom. I intended to use this type of image in two ways. Firstly, I wanted to make use of Marks's argument that the abstraction and texture of the object/image as it pixellates into blocks of colour renders it visually tactile or 'haptic'. As opposed to 'optic' visuality, 'haptic' visuality encourages the body to engage with the image by stimulating the non-audio-visual senses (Marks, xvi). The act of watching becomes a tactile relationship between the eye and the surface of the image, almost as if one were feeling the texture of the image with the surface of the eyeball. The film *Sunday* (Nossiter, 1997) uses this technique to provide moments of sensory connection in a cityscape where people are both culturally and viscerally dislocated.

Whilst shooting the video on the journey, I shot a great deal of pixellated footage. I wanted to be able to use these abstractions as cut-aways from the interviews, as moments of 'space' between the intense 'clean' close-ups and medium close-ups. By 'space', I mean a short period of time where identification is less immediate and the audience is able to formulate associations and memories of their own, adding deeper levels to the fabric of the film. I was attempting to create a 'haptic' image in order to stimulate the body of the spectator and access the world of memory through the senses. There are moments in the film when I feel the digital pixellations worked and others where I find the level of abstraction distracting. The story that emerged from the journey boasted strong characters that were both good on screen and interesting to watch. When editing the video I was confronted with a tension between the abstraction of my 'haptic' images and the accessibility of the story and the characters. I did not want to dictate the meaning of the images to the audience, but at the same time I wanted to structure the story as I knew it happened. I

also wanted the viewers to follow a narrative progression so that they were not left with a sense of alienation.

I think the digital close-ups are most successful in the sequence with my grandmother. The shot of her hands trying to undo the button is a specifically successful example of the use of the digital close-up. (Frame 1). This is partly because the pixellated image has been established in relation to the 'clean' close-up of her hands and face and the wider shot in order to contextualise, at least on some level, the colours and the forms of the pixellated pattern. In other words, the viewer is not entirely sure what the shot is of (but also not entirely lost) and the texture of the image and the screen as a whole becomes the site for identification instead of simply the conventional relationship formed with the identifiable represented subject. A slow zoom out from the abstraction of the pixellated hand to the form of the hand gradually appearing allows space for the viewer to make his/her own associations at each stage of the zoom. The editing of the film had to balance the abstraction of the pixellated images with the easy-to-identify images in order to maintain accessibility, and in order not to detract from the story or the characters.

Initially I thought that the use of the digital zoom in the reverse direction had the potential to speak of the emotional double-bind that images of people you love bring. For example, by zooming gradually into the 8mm images projected on the wall until they become an unrecognisable pattern of coloured blocks one gets the sensation of trying to push through the surface of the image with the surface of the eyeball to reach the 'realness' that it appears to hold. But instead of breaking through the other side, the image becomes unrecognisable, at once opening itself up for association while denying the expected access. The grainy quality of pixellated images makes them tactile and raw while drawing attention to the fact that the image is only a

surface. I left this particular idea out of the final edit as the voice-over explained that the 8mm images were ‘thin’ and story-less.

However, the sense of wanting to be closer, of pushing up against the surface of bodies and objects in order to remember or possess or belong is a technique and a theme I carried throughout the film. Much to my mother’s horror, the ‘clean’ close-ups of her face get too close. (Frame 4.) The close-ups are even sometimes uncomfortable. At the same time the close-up fragments are sometimes strangely beautiful and manage to communicate the love behind the desire for closeness. (Frame 5.)

The ‘clean’ close-ups try to put my body and the body of the spectator in contact with the absent body. (Frames 6 and 7.) Like the experience of the old films, the image, of course, is just a surface – a betrayal of the illusionary promise. There are many examples of this ‘pushing’ and too-closeness – particularly in the digital close-ups with the overextended zoom. (Frames 8-10.) The digital close-ups of myself listening and looking are also too close, representing the parallel desire to come to terms with my own identity – to be closer to myself. (Frames 10-12.) They break the order of the ‘reality’ of the documentary style and subvert the conventional role of the cut-away. I feel that both the ‘clean’ close-up and the digital pixellations are both successful in communicating the feeling of absence inherent in the relationship between my body, my memory and my identity. I also feel that the moments of abstraction they provide are true to the search for memory and the partial re-acquaintance of the senses with history.

Another interesting extension of Marks’s insights on the ‘haptic’ potential of video is the use of sound. She writes that ‘memory may be encoded in touch, sound and perhaps smell, more than in vision’ (129). This raises the important use of sound

as a vehicle of memory. The use of the refrain of the tinkling of bells on the horse cart in *Belle de Jour* (Bunuel, 1967) gave me some ideas for the potential use of sound in my own video. In the same way that a familiar piece of music or particular sound stimulates various memories randomly and automatically, Bunuel's use of the bell refrain sets up and uses the viewer's memory in his film. A relationship between the sound, association and viewer is carefully constructed. The first time we hear it, the sound is obviously not familiar, but we begin to associate the sound with Devenue's desire and fantasy life as the film progresses. By the end of the film we respond to the sound in a coded way – by associating the bells with her desire. In a way, the viewer's body has been encoded with the knowledge and the 'exercise' of memory engages us in a far deeper, more physical way with the inner life of the character.

The use of sound in my video was intended from the beginning of the process to create a visceral sense of memory. When thinking of ideas of how to use sound in the video, I became aware of the fact that most of the cinema that I have been exposed to operates within a particular politics of sound. Mary Ann Doane explains how synchronisation 'has played a major role in the dominant narrative cinema' and that 'despite a number of experiments with other types of sound/image relationships ... synchronous dialogue remains the dominant form of sonorous representation in the cinema' (1999: 364). This emphasis on the dominance of synchronous sound indicates the need (in dominant cinema) for a 'unity' of the senses – a homogenous illusion of reality. I would like to propose that the preoccupation of mainstream cinema with synchronous sound lies in the escapist quality of most mainstream films. The illusion of a homogenous 'reality' with which to engage is perhaps the primary element in the entertainment value of the cinematic experience. By examining the 'rules' of synchronisation and the strict insistence on a 'marriage' between image and sound

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(Doane, 1999: 364) it becomes possible to identify the politics of sound in both filmmaking and film theory.

The quest to create a polished, homogenous illusion of reality has informed the language of film since the advent of sound. Doane explains that ‘concomitant with the demand for a life-like representation is the desire for “presence”’ (365). By ‘presence’ she means the illusion of real physical sound as the ‘real’ would occur to the senses if that ‘real’ were actually happening. The concept of ‘presence’ applies to dialogue as well as ambient sound, specifically ‘room tone’ (the most basic unit of cinema sound). The production of ‘room tone’ is used to achieve the illusion of the real by acting as the foundation for the real. As Metz explains, ‘sound is never off’ (Doane: 367). Doane makes the point that ‘sound is never absent (silence is, at the very least, room tone)’ (367). Essentially, traditional mainstream cinema relies on synchronous sound, be it dialogue or ambient sound in the creation of the illusion of the real. As Bill Nichols comments, ‘this mimetic bond fools the senses, befuddles logic and disqualifies the image from the realm of reason’ (2000: 46). In the conventional language of film a mismatching of sound and image has been established as taboo. It is an agent that could expose the heterogeneity of the medium, which could in turn destroy the escapist mechanisms of the cinema. Doane’s theory, in retrospect, provides a useful yardstick with which to measure the concerns and practices of dominant cinema in the eighties.

It was with these theoretical concerns in mind that I searched for alternative ways to use sound in my video. Although the tension between abstraction and accessibility became apparent here too, I needed to think of ways to give a more visceral quality to sound in the video and to use sound for more than just the ‘illusion of a homogenous reality’. In fact, I was quite happy to expose the heterogeneity of the

medium (or the fact that I was creating a representation rather than ‘reality’) in order to break the illusion of both the old films and the one I was making as a kind of index to the real. This, in my opinion reinforced and communicated my realisation that memory and history exist not as the ‘real’ or the ‘true’ but as constructions that service the present. Without effecting the distraction of the viewer or removing the pleasure of watching, I needed to get more out of the soundtrack than just mimesis for the viewer.

Initially, I intended to use a recurring refrain of Sephronia’s low singing throughout the film even though the source of the singing would only be revealed two thirds of the way through. I hoped that this would not only create a degree of suspense but also a physical familiarity with Sephronia when the ‘familiar’ sound in the film is reunited with its body. This technique would dislocate the diegetic sound from its images and place it with a different set of images, creating the sense of two ‘times’ existing simultaneously. This could challenge the conventional perception (both filmically and ideologically) that life is experienced as a linear progression of episodes in which moments are lived and then left behind. Hopefully, ‘recognition and memory [would be] freed from the exclusive logic of the literal, and reactivated in the logic of the visceral’ (Rutherford, 2002: 65).

Unfortunately, I forgot to record Sephronia’s low singing and had to apply the technique to my grandmother’s voice instead. But I think that this worked out for the better. Marks describes how the audio and visual components of video can be used as two story levels instead of just one. The first sound in the video is the refrain of my grandmother singing. This refrain is later coupled with the sideways close-up of her face from the old film footage (an image she took of herself accidentally). Roughly half the way through the film the sound is united with its image. Up to this point the



‘space’ for imagining and remembering around that recurring sound has been wide open. The sound lives differently in each viewer. When it returns to its body it means much more than a ‘crazy-old-lady’ singing. This engagement with the workings of association and memory is effected by a changing relationship developed between the video and the body of the spectator. The shared sense of that sound (between the viewer and myself as the filmmaker) is an interstice in which identity can be located. Marks describes how ‘the body is a source of not just individual, but cultural memory’ (2000: xiii) and it is within this moment of sharing that I hope my story resonates on a wider cultural level.

Later in the video the sound of the granny singing recurs when Sephronia speaks of her, situating her as a kind of parallel presence and carrying the preceding meaning with it. The sound recurs for the last time when the momma, the third ‘mother’, my biological mother, is talking about her. The effect of the recurring sound seems to decrease the sense of distance between the women and me. In this sense the technique serves to communicate a re-acquaintance with history and memory. The sound of the video assuages the absence.

By making the audience a repository for memory, the video becomes an interplay between the theme of remembering and the memory of the viewer. Richard C. Smith describes how ‘one person’s memory is another person’s archive’ and how ‘memory exists in an ongoing process of performance and response’ (2002: 3).

Looking at video and memory this way, I am reminded of the narrative structure of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One hundred years of solitude* (2000), which uses the reader as an archive. The reader of the story is the only person who bears witness to the history of the family. The novel is written in such a way that the past exists in the reader in the present of the story. Only the reader has insight into the continuities and

discontinuities in the familial history. My process of attempting to excavate memory through the visceral 'performance' of the video relies on and incorporates the viewer in the process.

Another technique I considered was the superimposition of decaying footage over the body and the space of the characters. The deterioration of the film evokes the failings of memory, and it reminds us that memory is fading over time. In *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Resnais, 1959), the actress's remembering of the Hiroshima museum and the aftermath of the bomb are intercut with extreme close-ups of what is only revealed later as her and her lover's bodies. They converse about the experience of simultaneously remembering and not ever truly being capable of holding the memory of the disaster. In *Chile: Obstinate Memory* (Guzman, 1997) the filmmaker frames the old woman he is interviewing in a window frame and superimposes stock footage of the past over her face. This technique is effective in these films but I wanted to take the idea further.

In these films the superimposed 'actuality' footage is used as an index to the 'real'. It is treated like a historical document. I wanted to question the integrity of the images themselves and their failure to fully contain history. I thought of superimposing old footage over the images of the new video as a means of assemblage. What becomes interesting for me is the metaphor for absent memory that a melting reel might create. The sacred feeling of old family film lies in its fragility. (Frame 15.) At any moment it might melt in the machinery of the projector and that 'other world' blisters and disappears. Assemblage, by which I mean the superimposition, blistering and montage of images, also seems to do justice to the layered, non-linear nature of memory.

The question of how to use the old super 8 footage was informed by the above ideas but it eventually took on different forms to those initially intended. I used the image of the burning film stock early in the first sequence to establish my unfamiliarity with my grandmother's technology. Intercutting different fragments of the various old reels with images of myself operating the technology and viewing the silent world was intended to establish a relationship between the films and myself. The burning celluloid signifies the break down in memory and story. Instead of using the old footage as 'evidence' or 'truth' as in *Chile: Obstinate Memory* or *JFK*, the footage becomes ambiguous and fragmented. The initial 'magic' or illusion of access develops into an awareness of silence (and the lack of stories). Most importantly, the old footage is removed from the senses – it cannot deliver memory.

Superimposing the image of my grandmother rowing the old boat with feather dusters onto the landscape between her and myself, and again on the carpet of her TV room (her interior landscape) was a choice made for two reasons. (Frames 16 and 17.) Firstly, I intended to express the random surfacing of memory images within the flow of everyday 'reality' and to give a sense of my understanding of those images as strange fragments of a silent story that I did not really understand. As a result, the old image forms a substitute for real memory and is what I associate with my grandmother (hence the superimposition on the TV room carpet). Secondly, in the same way that the recurring audio refrains develop a relationship with the viewer, the repetition of the boat images, the image of my grandmother looking into the lens of her super 8 camera, and the old super 8 image of the child with the nanny, were all intended as the visual equivalent. (Frames 16-19.)

In retrospect, the use of the old film stock as a kind of substitute memory within the new footage of the journey to locate memory and history creates an

interesting dilemma. How could I use images to represent the search for the bodies of my history if it was the inability of images to hold history that began the journey in the first place? As Marks remarks, I had encountered the ‘impossibility of recovering history from its images’ (35). This is a question I will deal with at the end of this document.

Smells were more difficult to represent within the audio and visual capacities of video. I thought that my relentless close-ups would give the illusion of touch. Maybe a bit too obviously, I concentrated on hands to give the sensation of touch through the illusion of a more textured screen. The ‘clean’ close-ups on my grandmother’s hands, hair and face I shot with the feeling that I was trying to get close enough (through the image) to smell her. (Frame 20.) I felt that concentrating on her hands and hair would allow people to make their own associations and to bring their own memories of smell and touch to the experience of watching the film. The digital, pixellated shots were intended to give the sensation, as Marks describes, of ‘brushing [the surface of the] fabric with the skin of my eyes, rather than looking at it’ in order to lend the image tactility (127). (Frame 21.) The pixellation was also intended to discourage immediate identification and allow time and space for audience association and memory to develop.

One viewer of ‘The Granny, the Nanny, the Momma and Me’ remarked that it was a South African story that he could deeply relate to. I like to believe that those moments in the video when viewers are given a chance to apply their own associations to the images were the moments in which the most pronounced engagement with the story happened. Another viewer said that she liked the fact that she was not told (by the politics of the film) what to think or how to feel and that she could make up her own mind about the things (and senses) represented. This was an

effect I tried to create through the detail of my close-ups to the structure of the film as a whole. I am pleased with the level of ambiguity that I have returned to the image.

The close-ups of the thorn tree at 'Tanner House' were another experiment with tactility. (Frame 22.) The video has already established that this place is the landscape of my childhood by the time we see the close up pattern of the thorns. The slow-motion 'magical' appearance of the thorns gives the impression that time and memory are stored in them. I wanted to communicate my body's relationship with that tree that is revealed a few shots later in order to show that memory is embodied and embedded in the objects from the past. The 'Tanner House' sequence was edited as a free flow of associations. As the viewer encounters places and objects the stored memories involving these places and objects are shown. I cut in the shots of the little girl living there now because as I reunited my body and myself with the smells and textures of my childhood, she was floating in and out of frame like a ghost of me in a time of my life that only my body remembers. (Frame 23.)

I used Sephronia as the guide around that place of memories because her body is the repository of that history too, sometimes embedded in my history more than my own body is. I used the conventional cross-fade not for its typical passing-of-time purpose, but to visually superimpose Sephronia's body onto the objects in that house that carried memories of her. (Frame 22.) Visually, I concentrated (in the sequence before) on the rhythm of her hands and arms as she ironed because that rhythm is embedded in my memory. As a child I was tied to her back in a blanket and as I slept tight against her body, my body grew to know the rhythm of ironing. The digital close-ups were once again intended to bring the viewer close enough to touch and remember for themselves. The sound of Sephronia laughing that is looped over the last part of the accelerated sunset at the end of her segment is a recurrence of the

laugh from the trip through the Transkei before we meet her. It is another recurring memory sound.

Using a pan from present to past without cutting brings the past into the present. Both things exist at the same time – implying that the present is the collective total of things past. The pan is conventionally used as a means of showing two characters or pieces of action that exist in the same time and the same place. Moving from the present to the past as the frame does, for example, in *Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1995) gives the viewer a different sense of the past as opposed to the conventional cut-away flashback. This technique emphasises that history is stored in physical objects and landscape. One gets the sense that time sinks into the ground in *Lone Star* and can be traversed by studying the sand. Using this approach seems to involve a more embodied sense of memory and might prove useful in the excavation of memory in my video.

In the first road sequence of the video the voice-over explains how we visited the actual places that we had seen in the old footage in order to experience the physical sensation of being present in those places and in order to excavate the memories from the visceral world. Inspired by the above-mentioned technique I matched the new video frame with the old film frame and recreated (what I thought were) my grandmother's shots. In this way I tried to merge the present and the past. (Frames 25-30.)

The choice of making the video about the crossing of great distances in order to discover a dislocated past was partly inspired by my curiosity about time and space. I was hoping that the landscape of my grandparent's living room and the distance between us would read as history through the video. I was hoping that the digital close-ups that at first look like strange landscapes would hold time in them.

*City of God* (Mireilles, 2003) has inspired a possible idea for visualising memory, absence, identity and the senses. The static frame in the scene that explains the history of the drug-dealing house establishes the camera (and the viewer) as a constant object in the room. The viewer becomes an object that is undergoing the same process of standing by and silently witnessing history, and then holding onto it like dust that gets caught in wet varnish. The dissolves between the jump cuts leave us with the sense that the events and characters dissolve into the physical objects in the room (the floor, the walls, the curtains) only to materialise again in different forms before sinking back into the physical space.

I employed this idea in the first shot of my grandmother's living room when she materialises into the space in which she exists. (Frame 31.) The objects in the room take on a sense of constancy that implies that they, like the viewer, are constantly watching. I used this technique again in the sequence where my mother appears on the veranda in the final part of the video. Here I meant to suggest the inconstancy of her presence in comparison to the physical world around her. I think that this technique creates the sense of memory as embedded in the physical space and objects that surround us.

Through the practical techniques discussed in this explication and employed in the video, I have tried to counteract the feeling of distance between the original 8mm images and myself. I wanted the images and sounds that I created to give the sense that memory is not past and irretrievable and to counteract the 'loss' implied by the original 8mm images. This interrupts the conventional idea of past as history that lies behind us on a long linear line and the present as a moving point on that line. I would like for the viewer to say that memory lives with us, in our bodies and in the spaces

we inhabit. As the old professor in *Chile: Obstinate Memory* states, 'we have to accept to be the memory'.

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## CONCLUSION

At the same time as experimenting with new visual styles and concepts I wanted to document the process that I was undergoing in a basic sense so not all the shots were shot with texture and surface as the main priority. Susan Sontag comments that 'photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation' (1973: 10). A lot of the time I was trying to 'participate' in my own history from behind the cushion of the camera. I was trying to 'see' the familiar and the unfamiliar with a new 'eye' that afforded me a safe distance from myself. It was immensely difficult to be present as the filmmaker and as the granddaughter, the surrogate child, the daughter and myself at the same time. Sontag also writes that while taking images is a 'way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image' (9). To some extent I was absent in my journey to recover the physical world of my past. The conversion of my past into images echoed the double-bind of the old footage that had triggered the search in the first place. Marks describes how 'haptic visuality' implies a fundamental mourning of the absent object or the absent body' (191). For me this explains the inevitability of the 'thinness' of images.

Mark Walker told me how a great director was described as 'so good it was like he had camera lenses for eyes' (2004: conversation). It was this conflation between technology and the body that I tried to separate. The visual and aural styles in the video were intended to stimulate the memories stored in the body. The focus was a return to the body and a resistance to the idea that the old films could hold the visceral

and psychological weight of experience. The making of a video concerned with the body and the engagement of the senses is, however, inevitably a conflation of cinematic technology and the body. Perhaps the difference lies in the way in which the technology interacts with the body – not a ‘fooling of the senses’ as Nichols describes (46), but a deeper engagement with them that allows the video to tell a story that resides deep in the private histories of ordinary people.

This study started as a search for a new way to represent memory and identity in order to assuage the absence experienced in the old super 8 film reels – to add substance and sounds to those images by recombining them and placing them in a new context. I believe that I combined and created the images from the journey and the old films in a language that more fully articulated my identity than any other film or video style that I have seen before. On the other hand, I have already problematised the practice of using images to represent a dissatisfaction with images. Although I reworked the way images and sounds work conventionally and succeeded in creating a more textured and visceral experience, I do not believe that the combination of the audio and visual components that constitute video can hold the weight of my senses, my history and myself. The ‘fundamental mourning’ described by Marks is an appropriate state of being for the world of images. It is true that they can only achieve a ‘shaping of absence’ (Marx, lecture). Fortunately, this inherent characteristic echoes the theme of the video and therefore compliments it.

More important than a preoccupation with the medium’s ‘thinness’ is the function it serves as a means of expression for those unrepresented. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Marks discusses the characteristics of ‘intercultural cinema’ as a new filmic language that allows those from the ‘interstices’ of existing cultures to represent themselves (191). If I consider that very little of the film or

television I see ever represents me, then an adaption of Marks's intercultural theory can be used to describe my personal attempts to represent myself (my memory, my history). The video was, in some senses, an attempt to situate myself in my 'culture' (or in an interstice between many cultures). Sontag describes how 'the subsequent industrialisation of camera technology only carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratise all experiences by translating them into images' (7). Applying the same paradigm to video technology, one could argue that it is the selfsame industrialisation of cameras that has led to the easy attainability of the home video camera and that it is this very democracy of self-representation that enables us to tell stories about our experiences in order to establish and enjoy our identities. Of course, not everyone has access to a video camera and the means of dissemination are limited (especially in this country). However, it is now possible for more people to produce images that are closer to themselves, as I did. These images may not be the 'essence' or the 'truth' of us, but video can be used as a tool to tell a variety of different, personal stories that make up the fabric of our collective South African identity.

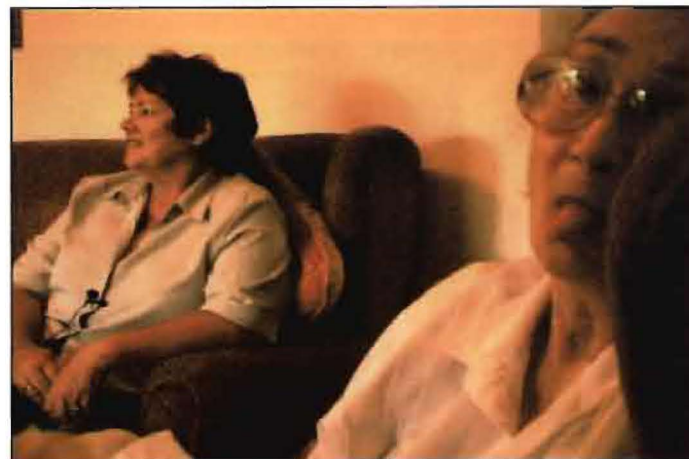
## ILLUSTRATIONS



*Frame 1: Digital close-up of Granny's hands trying to undo a button*



*Frame 2: A contextualising 'clean close-up'*



*Frame 3: Wider contextualising shot for the ambiguous digital close-up*



*Frame 4: Pushing to get closer – an uncomfortable close-up of my mother*



*Frame 5: Fragments of closeness and underlying love*



*Frame 6: 'Clean close-up of my mother's hands – trying to get the body closer*



*Frame 7: 'Clean close-up' of Sephronia's hands – trying to get the body closer*



*Frame 8: 'Haptic' digital close-up of Sephronia's hands ironing*



*Frame 9: Overextended digital zoom and too-closeness*





*Frame 10: More overextended digital zoom and 'too-closeness'*



*Frame 11: Digital close-up of myself listening and trying to get closer to myself*



*Frame 12: Digital close-up and reflection of myself watching my grandmother*



*Frame 13: Still frame of myself watching the fragile old reels*



*Frame 14: A fragile, precious moment that I thought was part of my history*



*Frame 15: The blistering celluloid like the corruption of memory*





*Frame 16: Old super 8 image of my grandmother superimposed on her lounge carpet*



*Frame 17: The same boat image superimposed on the physical landscape between us*



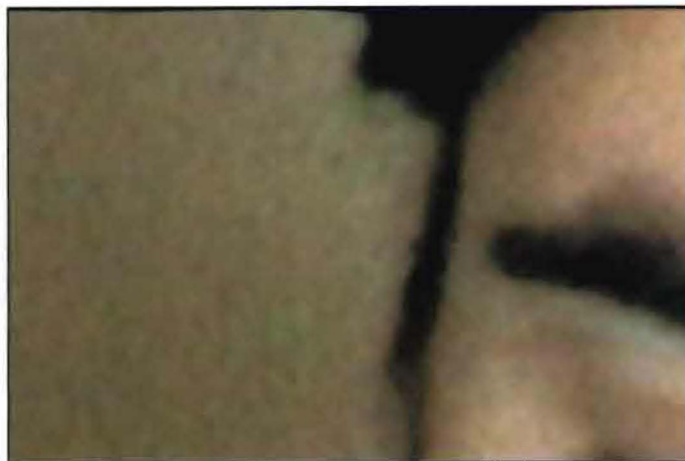
*Frame 18: The recurring visual motif of my grandmother looking into her camera*



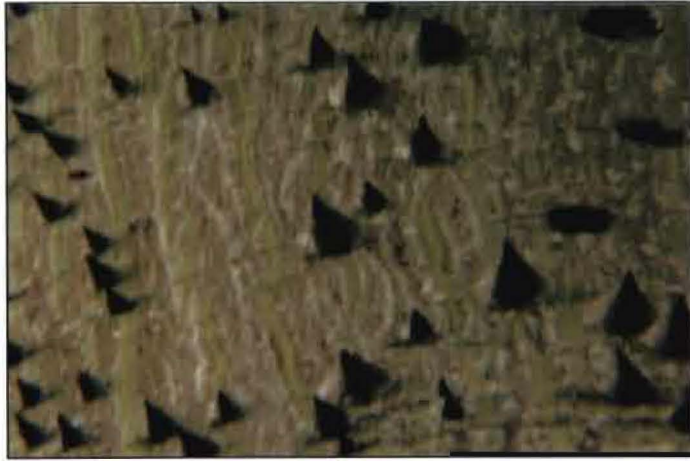
*Frame 19: Another recurring visual motif of my mother and her nanny*



*Frame 20: Trying to get close enough to smell her through the 'clean close-up'*



*Frame 21: Creating texture through the digital close-up – lending the image tactility*



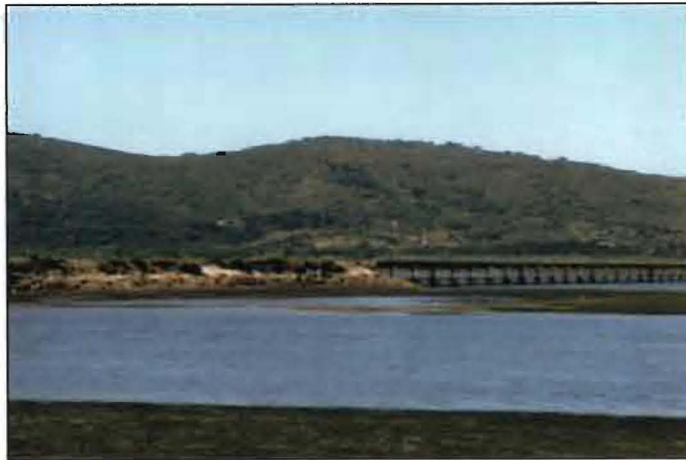
*Frame 22: Retrieving memory through the texture of the thorn tree at Tanner House*



*Frame 23: Little girl at Tanner House that ran in and out of my frames like a ghost*



*Frame 24: The cross-fade of Sephronia's body over the memory-object window latch*



*Frame 25: The matched frame from my camera 2003*



*Frame 26: Half-way through the cross-fade to the old super 8 image*



*Frame 27: The original super 8 image of the same space in 1957*





*Frame 28: Original super 8 image –trying to excavate memory from the same space*



*Frame 29: Shifting between the past and the present*



*Frame 30: The matching frame in the same space 2003*



*Frame 31: My grandmother materialises into the constant physical space*

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